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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCL](#) [CH](#)  
SUBJECT: CHINESE BLOGGERS COMPLAIN ABOUT CENSORSHIP,  
PAYOFFS AT ANNUAL CONFERENCE

REF: A. GUANGZHOU 632  
[1](#)B. BEIJING 3728

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Aubrey Carlson. Reasons 1.  
4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Government control and censorship of the Internet are the key problems facing Chinese netizens, according to participants at the fourth annual China Blogger Conference held in Guangzhou November 15-16. Conference attendees complained of officials paying bloggers to post pro-government opinions and of companies "buying off" bloggers and manipulating search engines to promote their products. Participants expressed hope that increasing the education levels of web users will counter authorities' efforts to manipulate the blogosphere. Despite growing restrictions on online speech, many bloggers see great potential for using the Internet for political mobilization and promoting social justice in China. Some presenters viewed the recent U.S. presidential election as an example of how to harness the power of the Internet for political purposes and as an inspiration for creating a more democratic China. End Summary.

BLOGGERS "STAR" AT CONFERENCE

[1](#)2. (C) Beijing PolOff and Guangzhou ConGenOff observed the fourth annual China Blogger Conference in Guangzhou November 15-16, a lively event that provided a window on the state of the Internet in China and on authorities' attempts at controlling it. The conference was attended by approximately 250 Chinese bloggers, software programmers, social activists, journalists, novelists and industry representatives as well as a small number of foreign reporters and Internet experts. Some bloggers enjoyed rock star-like status earned through their blogs, with PolOff witnessing multiple instances of young attendees running up to their favorite blogger to pose for a photograph. Attendees participated in work groups and heard presentations on a wide variety of topics including Internet censorship, citizen journalism, social media, search engine optimization, blog monetization, Internet intellectual property rights, blogger etiquette and online political mobilization. According to organizer Isaac Mao (strictly protect), the conference is the "only time Chinese bloggers meet face to face." While there are other Internet-related conferences in China, Mao said these "do not allow participants to speak freely."

"TECHNICALLY ILLEGAL" EVENT

[1](#)3. (C) According to Isaac Mao, conference organizers were volunteers who periodically met "virtually" via the Internet to plan the event. Mao insisted there was "no

conference leadership" and no government approval or official assembly permit was obtained. Though a number of corporate sponsors were listed on conference materials (including Chinese Internet giants Netease and Sina), Mao said organizers were determined to keep sponsorship to "a minimum."

¶4. (C) The conference was "technically an illegal gathering," multiple bloggers told PolOff, because attendance surpassed the "legal limit." (Note: Bloggers themselves, however, could not agree on what that legal limit is, with estimates ranging from 3 to 70 persons. Police officials showed up and took pictures on the first day of the conference, organizers told PolOff, but Mao claimed to have convinced them not to cancel the conclave. A small gathering related to the conference that was to be held at a nearby school on the night of November 15 was, however, shut down by authorities "because the list of attendees was leaked," Mao said without elaborating. Multiple bloggers told PolOff there were "certainly plainclothes police officers in the crowd." When a Chinese man began taking pictures of PolOff and Guangzhou-based blogger Wen Yunchao (aka Beifeng, strictly protect) engaging in conversation, Wen said the photographer was likely a police officer but he "did not care." Despite the concerns over the police presence, attendees did not appear inhibited. Presentations covered sensitive topics including censorship, democratizing China and using the Internet for political mobilization. One conference attendee wore a shirt with the characters for "police state" printed on the front. Asked about it, he proudly told PolOff he purchased the shirt on a trip to Taiwan,

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stating that he wears it simply because "China is undoubtedly a police state."

CENSORSHIP THE BIGGEST PROBLEM  
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¶5. (C) Many participants were critical of Chinese Government efforts to censor the Internet. Even software programmer and occasional blogger from Nanjing Zhu Huazhi (strictly protect), who told PolOff that the "Great Firewall does not affect 99 percent of online content" and that some censorship was aimed at eliminating truly undesirable web pages "such as gambling or pornography," argued that the "Great Firewall" should be eliminated. He agreed that it has a "chilling effect" on freedom of expression. Asked to weigh the various obstacles facing the Chinese Internet, Wen Yunchao said that the censorship problem "far outweighs other limits on discussion on the Internet" such as commercialization. Beijing-based lawyer and social activist blogger Liu Shaoyuan (strictly protect) told PolOff that censorship is a problem in his work, claiming that this year alone 70 postings were deleted from his blog covering his social activism.

¶6. (C) According to former reporting assistant at the New York Times Beijing Bureau and well-known Chinese blogger Zhao Jing (aka Michael Anti, strictly protect), major PRC Government censorship did not begin on the Internet until ¶2006. This followed three or four years of what Zhao called "the golden period" of the Chinese Internet, which was characterized by relatively few restrictions on online speech. During this time, Zhao said, many journalists used their blogs to supplement their reporting in mainstream media and to publish stories that could not pass more stringent censorship. Since 2006, however, censorship has "largely erased" more moderate "liberal voices," allowing the Chinese Internet to be "overrun by nationalists," Zhao asserted. Liu Shaoyuan separately agreed that "real" censorship began in earnest on the Chinese Internet in ¶2006. Liu said 2007 was "particularly bad," but there was a slight "opening up" during the Olympics "due to the large number of foreigners in China." In Liu's opinion, the

level of online censorship has "already returned to pre-Olympics levels." Zhao Jing noted that since 2006, much political discussion on the Chinese Internet has turned to overseas issues, such as the United States or Iraq. According to Zhao, participants in these discussions use foreign examples to debate problems in China without attracting the attention of censors.

#### BUYING OFF BLOGGERS

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17. (C) Participants criticized commercialization of the Chinese Internet. Yunnan-based blogger He Caitou (pseudonym, strictly protect) complained that when viewing search results on Chinese search engines, he generally "begins viewing at page seven" because the earlier pages contain paid advertisements and "fake postings made by the Government." Wen Yunchao maintains that problems with commercialization of the Internet are in large part due to Baidu, a Chinese search engine that allows advertisers to pay to raise their companies' profile in search results. Wen said that unlike the United States, "where advertising has only an indirect influence on media content," in China it has a "direct" influence. Companies pay bloggers to write positive articles about their products, He Caitou said, claiming that he was once offered 800 RMB to write a positive article about a company. As a result, He said, he does not trust the writings of bloggers he does not know personally.

#### EDUCATION AS SOLUTION

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18. (C) "The Internet is too powerful a tool for social activism for the Government ever to give up trying to control it," said Liu Shaoyuan, echoing the sentiments of many with whom PolOff spoke. Conference attendees were nevertheless convinced that many of the problems of the Chinese Internet could be overcome through improved education. Zhou Shuguang (aka Zuola, Zola, strictly protect), a self-proclaimed "citizen journalist," said increased education levels of Internet users will make government control more difficult. For example, Zhou argued, "no one with an education would agree to be a member of or be deceived by the 'fifty-cent club'." (Note: The "fifty-cent club" (or "wumaodang") refers to people hired to write pro-Government comments on the Internet. They are reportedly paid fifty "Chinese cents" (i.e., one-half of one renminbi) per post.) Conference organizer

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Isaac Mao agreed that improved education of Internet users would address current problems with the Internet, noting that he participated in a conference working group meeting on a "Ten-Year China Education Declaration" that will present ideas on how to increase understanding of the Internet in China. A draft is still being circulated among attendees and was not made available to PolOff.

#### SOCIAL MOBILIZATION AND CITIZEN JOURNALISTS

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19. (C) Several bloggers at the conference told PolOff they see the Internet becoming an increasingly powerful tool for social activism and political organization, despite government efforts to control it. Isaac Mao said he expects to see "increased use of the Internet for political mobilization" in the future. Other participants shied away from calling for the launch of a political movement on the Internet, though many predicted an increase in the web's importance to addressing specific social ills. Liu Shaoyuan told PolOff that "as access to the Internet spreads, common people will increasingly be able to use it as a tool to demand redress of their problems from the government."

¶10. (C) The Internet should be used as a platform for a new group of "citizen journalists," Zhou Shuguang (strictly protect) told PolOff. Zhou has become famous on the Chinese Internet for his work reporting events such as the June 2008 Weng'an riots in Guizhou Province (in which 30,000 people rioted over allegations of a cover-up in the rape and murder of a 15-year-old girl) and the summer 2007 Xiamen PX protests (a well-publicized protest against plans to build a chemical plant in Xiamen). During his presentation to the conference, Zhu encouraged attendees to follow in his footsteps, giving tips on how to become an effective "citizen journalist." Zhu said that in the future such journalists should be able to earn money for their work, though he later admitted to PolOff that he had "no idea" how to do so. Citizen journalists, however, can be an effective way to counter the censorship in the mainstream press, argued Zhu.

#### EFFECT OF U.S. ELECTION ON BLOGOSPHERE

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¶11. (C) The recent U.S. presidential election was referenced frequently in presentations and conversations during the conference. During his speech opening the conference and in a subsequent conversation with PolOff, Isaac Mao said he sees President-elect Obama's use of the Internet to mobilize supporters as a "model for what could be done in China." Beijing-based blogger Ping Ke (pseudonym, protect) delivered a presentation criticizing the combativeness of some Chinese netizens, claiming that political arguments in the United States are often "more rational." Ping Ke said he witnessed an argument between a supporter of Senator and then-presidential candidate McCain and a supporter of then-candidate Obama in which, though no agreement between the two was reached, neither side became "overly angry."

¶12. (C) Others saw lessons for China's democratization in the U.S. presidential election. During the conference's closing speech, Yang Hengjun (strictly protect), a Guangzhou-based blogger and novelist, began by announcing that he "did not tell anyone beforehand" what he would discuss so as not to "bring trouble to anyone." Yang, noting how "excited" he was about the U.S. presidential election, joked that one way to participate in a democratic process as a Chinese citizen would be to go to the United States, have a child and wait 47 years for him or her to become president. However, Yang argued, "I can't wait that long and don't tell me in 47 years China will not be electing its own president." Yang said President-elect Obama's victory is the "realization of the dreams of Martin Luther King." "When Martin Luther King's dream became a reality across the Pacific," said Yang, "we Chinese suddenly realized that that we too have had dreams." Recalling the aspirations articulated at the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, Yang called on the audience to "together recapture in our hearts those old dreams." Yang said the Internet represented the first time in Chinese history that the Chinese people have had the means to express their hopes. The closing line of Yang's speech quoted the Democratic candidate's presidential campaign slogan, "yes we can," eliciting enthusiastic applause from the audience. (Note: In a November 21 post on his blog, Yang claimed he heard that security officials attending the conference applauded at this point in his speech as well.)

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¶13. (C) Audience questions posed to Yang Hengjun were equally politically charged. One man demanded to know "when China will be able to elect our Chairman, just as the United States has elected its leader." Yang replied that the Chinese people should "be optimistic." Another questioner, who the previous day told PolOff that democratic change "should only come slowly in China," asked

Yang what individuals can do to further change the PRC.

#### BLOGGER BIOS

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¶14. (C) Below is a partial listing, with biographic information, of influential bloggers met by PolOff at the conference:

-- Zhou Shuguang (Zuola, Zola): Zhou is a young "citizen journalist" who specializes in reporting on protests and riots and has a knack for self-promotion. Zhou said he owns a coffee shop that allows him to fund his activities. He became a journalist to "help people and earn money;" however, he confessed that he has no idea how he will earn money from what he does. Zhou recently tried to leave China to visit Germany, but was prevented from doing so by authorities. Zhou's website is [www.zuola.com](http://www.zuola.com).

-- Liu Shaoyuan: Liu is a Beijing-based lawyer who reports social injustice on his blog. Liu claimed to run ten blogs, but pointed PolOff to just one: [blog.sina.com.cn/liuxiaoyuan](http://blog.sina.com.cn/liuxiaoyuan).

-- Zhao Jing (Michael Anti): Zhao is a former hotel clerk whose blog was "discovered" by an editor at the Nanfang Daily Group. Zhao has written for a number of Chinese and Western publications including the New York Times where he worked as a reporting assistant in the Beijing bureau. He has recently returned from a fellowship at Harvard University and currently teaches international journalism at Shantou University's Journalism School in Guangdong Province. Zhao is ethnically Hui but converted to Christianity while in college in Nanjing. He speaks English fluently but is more comfortable in Chinese.

-- Mao Xianghui (Isaac Mao): Mao is a passionate advocate for eliminating government control of the Internet. He has been a leader of all four Chinese Blogger conferences. Mao is currently on a Harvard research fellowship, but he says he is still able to spend "most of his time" in China. Mao's blog is [www.isaacmao.com](http://www.isaacmao.com). Mao speaks fluent English.

-- Wen Yunchao (Beifeng): Wen is a Guangzhou-based blogger who owns a local bar and restaurant. According to Zhao Jing, Wen is also in charge of Chinese Internet portal Netease's blog platform. Wen's blog is [www.bullog.cn/blogs/wenyunchao](http://www.bullog.cn/blogs/wenyunchao).

-- He Caitou (pseudonym): He is a Yunnan-based blogger well-known for his sardonic wit. One conference attendee interrupted a conversation with PolOff when He walked by to request a photo with the blogger. He's blog is [www.hecaitou.com](http://www.hecaitou.com). He appears to speak some English.

-- Yang Hengjun: Yang, a former government official, is the author of a number of popular spy novels. Yang said he has lived in Australia and Hong Kong for extended periods of time. He is a passionate proponent of China's democratization. Yang's blog is [yanghengjun.blog.hexun.com](http://yanghengjun.blog.hexun.com).  
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